

# From *Terra Madre* to *Terra Nullis*

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*On radical earth democracy, the biocentric Man and environmental justice.*

## Abstract

*Through this text I seek to refine and enhance the ideas I proposed in the initial reflection. From criticising the focus of the hegemonic environmental discourses centring on the responsibility of the individual to take the blame of environmental degradation as a means to shift attention away from the corporate profiteers of economic growth and its resulting environmental decline, this essay will comprise a broader critique of the dominating anthropocentrism in relation to the environment, more specifically corporate anthropocentrism. The term denotes a systematic inquiry of erasing the intrinsic value of all beings in the name of economic growth and under the framework of neoliberal policies and globalization. Furthermore, I wish to highlight and discuss the irrefutable link between anthropocentrism and its colonial legacy, and how it is being renewed and standardised through contemporary debates of modernity, development and a generalizing division between “West and the rest”. By transcending these superficial measures and understanding its historical as well as current fatal consequences, I will advocate for an epistemological paradigm shift towards what the activist and scholar Vandana Shiva calls Earth Democracy, a society in which preservation of the earth is inseparable from social justice as it is the fundamental premise for all life.*

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## Introduction

Through the lens of environmental justice, the urgency of environmental degradation becomes inseparable from the urgency of social, political and economic degradation. They are entangled and form an interconnected narrative of the history of exploitation, that is, exploitation of earth and humans who inhabit it. The contemporary futural concern for the planet is a common worry that is told to be the result of an ecological decline stemming from overconsumption, overproduction and ignorance. Yet these concerns seem to appear in a somewhat ahistorical vacuum, leaving no room for a critical analysis of their formative ideology. This ideology is what Sylvia Winther calls the *biocentrism of Man*, namely the way the human is separated from (his) surroundings and standardised/idealised through his excellence: what makes the human human is its separation from its body and its ability to exceed earthly limits (Parker, 2021). The historical Furthermore, this ideology is based on a dominating legacy of anthropocentrism, which can be related to the term Anthropocene. Anthropocene as a geological period has firmly been rejected, yet the term is still being used to refer to our contemporary context where global environment is being shaped by humans and not vice versa. The historical context of anthropocentrism has been refined by for instance activist and author Vandana Shiva to corporate anthropocentrism, which denotes a more precise diagnosis of the modern-day capitalist system, in which the value of the human is subordinated to that of the corporate entities (Shiva, 2016). Furthermore, to understand the entanglement between climate and colonialism is crucial to place the ecological crisis in a historical context and demonstrates the current environmental decline as a symptom or rather a proof of the power of those who benefit from this very deterioration. Environmental collapse is being perceived as inevitable yet marked by a sense that any solution is way beyond reach, as if it's separated from the sphere of human action. To be able to act there we need to transcend the dominant framework within which we perceive ecology and transcend our traditional epistemological stance. How we articulate our criticism is crucial for a sustainable debate on the environment we inhabit. Lastly, remembering the entanglement between climate, remembering and bringing forth our ideas of the society we wish to create needs to continue to develop as

a process of rearticulation and active discussion in the struggle for a more just and more liveable world.

## Reconstructing our epistemological stance

The ways in which the world is divided and segregated is a premise for how it is being perceived. As the western narrative is heavily grounded in the “West and the rest” division, and the historical sequence of “Plato to NATO”, it is important to consider how these narratives form the supposedly harmless discourse on development with regard to economic and ecological conditions (Sayyid, 2022). As anthropologist Arturo Escobar argues in his book *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, the discourse development makes it possible to maintain the focus on domination of the countries labelled underdeveloped, under the veil of “economic progress” and “ending poverty”. Rapid growth of material production and technicalisation of agriculture were the main factors that according to the Truman Doctrine would lead to a much-wanted capital growth in the so-called underdeveloped countries (Escobar, 2012). He writes:

*[...] To speak development, one must adhere to certain rules of statement that go back to the basic system of categories and relations. [...] the forms of knowledge that refer to it and through which it comes into being and is elaborated into objects, concepts, theories, and the like; the system of power that regulates its practice; and the forms of subjectivity fostered by this discourse, those through which people come to recognize themselves as developed or underdeveloped. [...] This is why it is necessary to examine development in relation to the modern experiences of knowing, seeing, counting, economizing, and the like. [...].*

*(Escobar, 2012, p. 17)*

Hence, development is not merely a measure of standards of living, but rather a way of understanding the world through hierarchies, categorization and separation, it is a developed and an underdeveloped. Such a language is not new concept that emerged after the second world war to merely lift populations out of poverty, but a structural rearticulation of the same colonial discourse that existed for centuries before. Even more so, the development plan of the US did not prove to bring wealth to the people but rather led to increasing impoverishment, exploitation and oppression, by amongst other factors contributing to and imposing privatization, commodification and national debt,

supporting authoritarian regimes, monopolization of production, and introducing capitalist policies of growth as methods of economic progress (Escobar, 2012). An example of this is the American corporation Monsanto which for the last 30 years had taken monopoly over India's cotton seed and ended up with 90% of the market share on seeds. Farmers were prevented from saving their own local seeds and were forced to buy new, genetically modified seeds, every season (Chow, 2016). This led to a drastic impoverishment in biodiversity and a decline in soil fertility as the modified seed produced its own pesticide causing resilience and weak crops over time, as well as a debt for the farmer. Vandana Shiva writes:

*[...] Globalization and neoliberal policies which places the rights of corporations above nature's and people's rights, are at the root of why since 1995 nearly 300,000 farmers in India have taken their lives.*

*(Shiva, 2016, p. xi)*

When examining the language that is being used to divide the world, for so to describe it, may it be developed/underdeveloped, The Middle East or the global south, let us remember that none of these terms were created in a vacuum, and comes with a legacy built on segregation and subordination, and continues to do so. Language is never neutral and must be understood as the very fundament of our epistemological attitudes.

## A world of commodities

Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) enabling the livelihood of many people to be monopolised and capitalized on, the rhetoric of the "ownership society" became apparent. Through such a rhetoric, life forms and necessities including water, biodiversity, cells, animals and plants becomes a topic of patent, and its intrinsic worth and subjecthood is being erased for the potential profit (Shiva, 2016, p. 41).

Available water for all, public systems providing education, and healthcare for the commons do not create profit, whilst when it is being commodified, privatized or drained and put into water bottles, these commons become commodities that corporations can profit from. The commons lose their intrinsic value for their marked net worth. What are the consequences of this process of commodification? As I mentioned earlier in the text development is and have functioned as a measure of

capitalist growth within the western hemisphere and imposed on the so-called underdeveloped countries, where these policies have taken the form of development projects as a means to force features similar to the perceived “advanced countries” in order to exploit the natural resources of these countries. With the establishment of the WTO (World Trade Organisation) at the Bretton Woods conference in 1994, the articulation of the already emerging policies of corporate anthropocentrism were ratified within the language that promoted (corporate) globalization, free trade and flourishing economy, through agreements such as TRIPS whilst taking away their subjecthood and autonomy. This exploitation is also happening on an institutional scale, taking the form of privatization of public systems, making them unavailable for most of the population. The reason why these consequences largely go untold, is partly due to the dominating measures used to calculate national growth. The liberal idea the world is substantially getting better on a global scale in terms of a decline in child mortality, extreme poverty and hunger, and an increase in people with access to education, healthcare and clean water, rooted in measures claiming that a worldwide economic growth is ultimately benefitting everyone. By using narrow and rather misleading measures such as GDP or PPP, the actualities of the human conditions are not measured, for instance PPP, whilst working as an analysis metric for economic productivity, fails to acknowledge the cost of meeting basic needs in a given context (Sullivan, Moatsos, & Hickel, 2023). Scholars such as Hans Rosling argue for an optimistic view on world development, mainly using GDP as the measure for economic growth in claiming that the world is progressing, yet does not acknowledge the many weaknesses of the GDP, for instance that it does not consider material health in the future nor does it reflect the environmental degradation taking place simultaneously with, and often because of economic growth (Potter, 2018). In the book *Global Environmental Politics*, the three scholars Chasek, Downie and Brown argue for a more accurate measure of wealth that integrates environmental effects. However they also denote environmental issues as an example of the “Tragedy of the commons” merely representing negative externalities from an economists point of view, “the unintended consequences or side effects of one’s actions that are borne by other [...]” (Chasek, Downie, & Brown, 2016, p. 14). I would rather argue that the negative ecological effects are more comprehensive than merely the tragic byproduct of a will to grow profit, but

rather an inseparable part of the neoliberal policy which benefits from the environmental crisis since it creates a demand for products and services that was publicly available before the age of corporate anthropocentrism. Impoverishment and gaping inequality are intrinsically parts of neoliberal policies. Its shallow promise of “free market democracy” is being demonstrated through neoliberal reform policies that renders governmental elections useless and destroys actual democracy through “the enclosure of the commons.” (Shiva, 2016, p. 30). What is left is a political landscape where people’s opinion is so irrelevant that it resembles economic dictatorship where corporate control is at the hear of the neoliberal body.

## Towards earth democracy

Looking into how humans in the western tradition have regarded themselves as separate from the earth their inhabit, through the ideology of the Biocentric Man, the relevance of coloniality and race theory manifests itself in the idealisation of the one man. Hence, the human is the Man, defined by Aristotle as the man with the “[...] capacity for nous, for thought, “which is entirely independent of the body [...]” (Parker, 2021, p. 4). In contrast, the indigenous cultures worldwide have instead understood their experience of life as one inseparable form the environment they inhabit. Native American Chief Seattle of the Suquamish tribe held in 1848 a speech which captures the very notion of human life as part of the ecological surroundings:

*[...] If you do not own the freshness of the air, the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?*

*[...]*

*This we know; the earth does not belong to man; man belongs to earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites our families. All things are connected.*

*(Shiva, 2016, p. 1)*

To be able to see the connection between politics and ecology is crucial for how we are to solve the environmental degradation. Through the bifurcation of the two, Professor Emily Anne Parker argues, the entanglement of rising sea levels, racially driven police brutality, increasing risk of crop failure, neocolonial tourism and criminalization of climate refugees are being obfuscated whilst separated for limiting disruption. The key

to understand the euphemism “climate change” is according to Parker an interpretation of the ideology of the biocentric Man. This separation reflects both the divide between human body and spirit/conscience, and the divide between the universal body, which is drawing on Frantz Fanon critique of the polis refers to a falsely embodied universal body that is superior to animality, the agency of the natural world and blackness, in the colonial context. The polis is being further extended by Parker to not only refer to western society as such, but their epistemological stance towards the presumed other (Parker, *Zoonosis and the Polis: COVID-19 and Frantz Fanon's Critique of the Modern Colony*, 2021). To be able to respond meaningfully to the environmental degradation, the concept of the distinction between human and non-human, the body and the thought needs to be critically analysed.

## Conclusion

As I have discussed throughout this text, environmental degradation is not merely a change of climate, but rather an entanglement of political, ecological and social crisis. For us to fully grasp the meaning of our current situation, the epistemological framework that the west is operating with, and the neoliberal, profit-driven policies that optimizes this degradation needs to be addressed. Furthermore, a solution to the global crisis must take place on three fronts. On the material and practical field, there needs to be an increase in ordinary peoples day to day resistance through local communities and grassroots movements cooperating to regain ownership of their means of production, through organisations (Fairlie, Hildyard, Lohmann, Sexton, & Et al, 1994). An example of this is Vandana Shiva’s organisation *Navdanya*, which fights for the right of farmers, and promotes biodiversity by provide climate-resilient seeds to farmers in India. Moreover, there needs to be a targeted and more direct movements taking place, like when people’s movements stopped the WTO meeting in Seattle in 1999, and the global movements Extinction Rebellion and Greenpeace who uses civil disobedience to push governments to act and people to open their eyes to the environmental destruction caused by big corporations such as Shell and Exxon (Shiva, 2016). Lastly, to address the fundamental approach to climate change, being critical of its perceived exceptionality in the dominating sociopolitical and (a)historical narrative is crucial to understand its entanglement and selective attention.

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